CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION OF AGRIBUSINESS AND RELATED INDUSTRIES IN WEST AFRICA

by

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Greater regional integration in West Africa would bring both real opportunities and many challenges. While regional integration and cooperation has been the talk in the region for decades, the reality has fallen far short of the words. In this paper we examine some of the history of regional integration and the associated institutions and then examine the potential benefits, major obstacles, and potential actions that could be taken to strengthen regional integration, especially for agribusinesses in the region.

Background on Regional Integration in West Africa

The two major institutions involved in formal regional integration in West Africa are UEMOA (West African Economic and Monetary Union) and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). UEMOA and its predecessor institutions have existed since independence of the former French colonies. UEMOA itself was formed in 1994 and today consists of seven francophone countries plus Guinea-Bissau. ECOWAS was created in 1975 and includes the eight UEMOA countries plus seven other West African states.[1] Table 1 provides selected economic and social indicators for the UEMOA and ECOWAS countries. Clearly, it is a very poor region with a limited total market size.

Table 1
Selected Economic and Social Indicators for UEMOA and ECOWAS Countries

Indicator	**UEMOA**	**ECOWAS**
Population	70 million	236 million
GDP	$28 billion	$82 billion
GNP per capita	$395	$322
GDP growth	3.5%	3.6%
Literacy rate	34%	55%
Life expectancy at birth	47 years	48 years
Access to safe water	68%	60%

Source: World Bank Africa Regional Data Base, either actual or estimated for 2000.

Approach to regional integration

The two organizations have different histories, agendas, and outcomes to date. UEMOA is a monetary union and recently it has made more progress in trade integration (Page and Bilal). It is generally recognized that UEMOA has a strong professional staff that has contributed to its effectiveness. UEMOA is governed by a conference of heads of state, where unanimous consent is required. But there is a council of ministers that handles most of the issues that arise, and there only a majority vote is necessary.

[1] UEOMA includes Benin, Burkina-Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, and Guinea-Bissau. ECOWAS includes these eight countries plus Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

ECOWAS has placed emphasis on policy coordination, but has had limited success due to conflicting national economic interests. Originally, ECOWAS had objectives of internal trade liberalization and a common external tariff, but that objective has not been achieved. The private sector was one of the driving forces behind the creation of ECOWAS, but it has not been successful in advancing the regional integration agenda. The governing body for ECOWAS is the heads of state of member countries. But there is no clear implementation or enforcement body, which has weakened the organization. There exists a long list of approved protocols and agreements that have not been adopted by member states.

Forces for integration[2]

The major forces for integration are the following:

- Gains from market size of a combined market - With the possible exceptions of Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, none of the other countries are large enough to capture any economies of scale in production or marketing. All the countries need the larger market that regional integration would bring.
- Traditional integration of peoples in the region – Historically, there has been a considerable amount of travel and trade among the peoples and countries of the region. Thus, there is already a long history of integration independent of the actions of any government or regional organization.
- Important lessons from past mistakes have been applied – The past policy of import substitution has been rejected by most governments in the region. Also, governments are aware of the reasons for past failure of internal trade liberalization or integration efforts. The measures must be perceived to be fair to all countries in the regional organization.
- Demands from the private sector and civil society are increasingly important – Both NGOs and the private sector believe that better regional integration will help the countries in the region to escape the stagnation and conflicts that have marked recent years. The West African Enterprise Network has been particularly active in lobbying governments and regional organizations.
- Increased political commitment – Governments in the region now recognize that all can be better off with better regional integration. They also recognize that countries acting in pure self interest in the past have been a major barrier to progress in regional integration.
- Greater donor interest and support – In the past, some of the donors preferred to deal with individual states and did not encourage regional integration. There was some concern that regional trade blocks would not achieve welfare gains and could impede multi-lateral trade negotiation progress. However, recently bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors appear to be strongly supporting better regional integration.

Obstacles to integration

Following are some of the major obstacles that must be overcome:

- Difficult and highly fragmented geography – There is a great diversity among the member ECOWAS countries. Half the 236 million people live in Nigeria, and the rest

[2] Part of this and the following section draw upon the World Bank West Africa regional integration plan.

are dispersed among the 14 other countries. Half the area is in landlocked countries, and the transport systems among countries are often quite poor. Other infrastructure costs like electricity also are exceedingly high. Three European languages plus many local languages are spoken, so there is no unifying language. Much of the region has highly variable rainfall that leads to large variability in GDP since agriculture is a large fraction of GDP.

- The market is small and growing slowly – The GDP of the ECOWAS region is about the same as that of Ireland, and, of course, the per capita income is tiny. More than 70 percent of the population live on less than $500/year. There is also considerable variability among the countries ranging from $125/year for Sierra Leone to $1330 for Cape Verde. Long term growth has been about 3 percent, not much over the long term population growth rate of 2.8 percent.
- Economic similarities among the countries – All the economies are natural resource based, which limits opportunities for trade. Nigeria is an important oil exporter, but exports for the other countries are similar one to the other. With similar economic structures, there is limited scope for gains from intra-regional trade.
- Very poor countries – As indicated above, there is a very high incidence of poverty all over the region. Thus, there is little purchasing power in the region. Social indicators, such as those shown in Table 1, are very low, with huge investments needed in social infrastructure.
- Fragile political environment – The region has been plagued with military conflicts and other social unrest. Democracy has been institutionalized in some countries but not all. Political instability makes achieving regional integration much more difficult.
- Weak policy performance - Some of the countries in the region have not implemented the structural adjustment reforms to align their economies with the global economic environment. There is considerable divergence among the countries in terms of their policy reform progress. This divergence makes it difficult to achieve regional integration, which depends, to some extent on consistent policy environments.

Status of regional integration

Intra-regional trade has grown little and rests between 6 and 12 percent of total trade depending on the data sources one uses. Estimates of unofficial or informal trade range up to 30 percent of total trade. Most analysts attribute much of the failure to achieve a higher degree of integration to a weak ECOWAS administration with little or no enforcement power and to a lack of political commitment on the part of member countries. Part of the lack of political commitment, no doubt, derives from the unstated belief that the gains from greater integration may not be sufficient to compensate for the political and economic costs.

The African Development Bank assessment of the current status of regional integration generally in Africa contains many points that apply to West Africa:

- Governments have shown little willingness to subordinate domestic political and economic interests to to supranational institutions with long-term regional goals.
- Past pursuit of import substitution policies led to the establishment of inefficient domestic industries protected by high tariffs. Shedding the vestiges of this legacy has proven to be difficult.

- Many governments rely heavily on tariff revenue to fund government budgets. Collection of revenue from other (domestic) sources is difficult administratively and politically.
- Regional organizations such as ECOWAS have had overly ambitious goals and unrealistic time frames for implementation. Repeated failure and delays have not induced confidence in the regional organizations.
- Inadequate mechanisms for equitable sharing of costs and benefits of regional schemes has led to another failure of implementation.
- Political instability, civil unrest, and military conflict have made the work of regional organizations very difficult.
- Frequent policy reversals have reduced credibility of regional organizations and regional agreements.

However, the African Development Bank recognizes that despite these major problems, there is recently renewed interest in regional integration both within West Africa and on the part of major donors.

Dimensions of Integration

Despite the perceived low level of accomplishment in many areas, the ECOWAS agenda for regional integration is quite ambitious. It encompasses not only trade but also infrastructure development, monetary and financial integration, regional peace and security, mobility of citizens, private sector development, and other areas. In this section, we describe the status of regional integration along these dimensions.[3]

Trade

One of the important economic questions regarding regional integration and trade concerns the extent to which the regional trade agreements enhance welfare or reduce it. Robinson and Thierfelder analyzed this tradeoff and reached the following conclusions:

- Trade creation greatly exceeds trade diversion in virtually all regional trade agreements studied. In other words, more new trade is created than is diverted from other sources by the regional trade agreements.
- The new trade theory shows even larger gains from regional trade agreements than standard neoclassical trade theory.
- Domestic policy reforms that normally accompany regional trade agreements provide a source of additional welfare gains.

The bottom line is that, contrary to previous economic doctrine, regional trade agreements are welfare enhancing and should be pursued.

ECOWAS has not been successful in convincing countries to implement the trade policy reforms necessary to advance the trade dimension of regional integration. Some of the specific problems and issues are the following (Aryeetey):

[3] This section draws upon the Aryeetey paper.

- Difficulties in standardizing and harmonizing customs documents and tariff schedules;
- Failure to extend total exemption from duties and taxes for unprocessed goods and traditional handicraft products;
- Failure to apply preferential tariffs to approved industrial products;
- Continued existence of non-tariff barriers, especially in the case of food and textiles;
- Absence of certificates of origin for unprocessed goods and for industrial goods, and failure to produce both the certificates of origin and the export declaration;
- Stringent rules of origin which often exclude the bulk of manufactured and agricultural products produced by member states from the Community's trade liberalization programs;
- Problems in balancing the distribution of benefits and costs of economic integration;
- Failure to pay up contributions to the compensation budget;
- Little awareness by the public of the scheme's potential benefits;
- Rigid border formalities and customs officials' intransigence.

All of these problems and issues link back to the lack of political commitment by member states. They also reflect the weak administrative position of the ECOWAS secretariat. In addition, the compensation scheme has been characterized as too rigid and ineffective. All of these problems must be addressed if we are to achieve genuine regional integration in the trade arena.

As indicated above, informal trade is quite important within the region, sometimes estimated at up to 30 percent of total trade (three-five times formal trade, depending on the data source used). Page and Bilal indicate that informal trade is condoned by government officials for the following reasons:

- Incapacity by officials to effectively prevent, regulate, or control informal trade;
- Complicity of state officials who can thus capture for their own benefits part of the gains from informal trade;
- The influence of the state over informal trade which enables officials to reward (political) loyalty by private traders.

Similarly, they conclude that informal trade has the following negative effects on regional integration:

- Rent-seeking and rent-protecting behavior by informal networks;
- Imposition of various forms of informal protectionist measures (export taxes, various levies, road controls, etc.)
- Favorable environment for illegal transactions, widespread corruption, tacit agreements, conducive to a criminalization of the economy;
- Disruptive effects on local production;
- Lack of quality and technical standards;
- Loss of important potential (tax) revenues for the state.

Clearly, there are vested interests in continuing the established informal trade system. So long as transaction costs in the official system are perceived to be high, it is likely that the informal system will continue to be strong. However, there are clear losses for the countries and the region in terms of efficiency and government revenue. Thus, there are significant welfare gains to be had from improvements that would divert more of the informal trade to formal channels.

Infrastructure development

ECOWAS has had greater success in infrastructure development, particularly in road construction. Close to 90 percent of the trans-Sahelian and trans-costal highways have been completed. Other road projects have advanced. Projects are envisioned for improved rail links and a costal shipping line. There are proposals for joint standards in agriculture and telecommunications, but they have not yet been implemented. There has been some effort in establishing a regional electricity grid, a project that has tremendous potential, but not nearly enough progress has been made. Some of the important challenges ahead are the following (Aryeetey):

- Satisfying the demand for infrastructure services, particularly in the areas of electricity, water supply, transport, telecommunications, sea ports and airports;
- Acquiring a certain minimum technical capacity to identify and promote specific infrastructure development projects, including the capacity to undertake feasibility studies;
- Securing external financing for the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects at the sub-regional level.

Monetary and financial

Monetary and financial issues are quite different for UEMOA and ECOWAS. UEMOA is a monetary union with a currency backed by the French government. Among UEMOA countries financial transactions have a relatively low transactions cost with a functioning central bank to facilitate exchanges. As of 2000, UEMOA began monitoring macroeconomic policies of member countries, with the objective of maintaining convergence and preventing monetary problems. UEMOA is considering going further to include harmonizing indirect taxes among member countries (Page and Bilal).

ECOWAS, of course, is not a monetary union at this point, and monetary transactions have very high transactions costs. The West African Monetary Agency has not been able to function effectively because member states have not supplied the necessary foreign exchange. Because the national currencies are not convertible, there are very high transactions costs in trading across national borders. Often a third currency and a foreign bank must be used to implement transactions.

In 2000, non-UEMOA ECOWAS countries began the process of establishing a monetary union with the objective of merging with UEMOA in 2003 to create a West African monetary union. This project is considerably behind schedule, and may be quite difficult to implement. It is complicated by the French support for the CFA that may not be extended to a broader currency. It would require that non-UEMOA ECOWAS countries achieve convergence in their monetary and fiscal policies. At present, most countries are far short of meeting their targets. However, even if monetary union remains an elusive goal, it is quite important that non-UEMOA ECOWAS countries make progress on the goal of a viable authority to facilitate trade transactions and ultimately a central bank. There is little hope of expanding intra-regional trade without reducing the high transactions costs associated with that trade.

External policies

UEMOA and ECOWAS have different positions regarding external trade agreement negotiations. UEMOA has authority for external trade relations and is implementing that authority. UEMOA countries can develop a common external position (by two-thirds majority vote), and the individual governments are expected to support that position. UEMOA has developed common positions in the WTO trade negotiations. It has been authorized by the EU to begin negotiations for an economic partnership agreement. UEMOA even has opened its own delegation office in Brussels.

The situation for ECOWAS is quite different. ECOWAS does not have trade negotiation authority according to its founding treaty. It does not establish external positions for members with respect to WTO or bi-lateral negotiations. Thus, ECOWAS is not in a position at present to develop common external positions for member countries or to negotiate on their behalf.

Schiff examines domestic and external policy choices for small countries in the face of a changing global environment and provides the following general recommendations:

- Participants in regional arrangements should further reduce their border protection.
- The trade component of the Cotonou Agreement between ACP and EU is likely to harm small ACP countries, and they should liberalize their trade policies to reduce the transfers to the EU.
- Small countries should sign free trade agreements with all OECD countries and generally pursue multilateral liberalization.
- The EU and other OECD countries should provide technical assistance to ACP countries to help with domestic reforms as well as WTO commitments.

Free movement of persons and resident rights

In 1992, the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of community citizens established rights for citizens to enter any ECOWAS state without a visa, to reside and seek employment anywhere in the region, and to establish a business anywhere in the region. According to Aryeetey, free movement and intra-community trade are still impeded by:

- Cumbersome border procedures causing considerable delays
- Numerous illegal roadblocks
- Extortion and demand for illegal levies
- National regulations that are counter to ECOWAS protocol
- Failure of visitors to regularize their stay

Regional peace and security

Regional peace and security is an area where perhaps ECOWAS has had greater success. It has carried out a number of initiatives to maintain peace and security in the region such as ECOMOG activities in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau. The framework for peace and security activities was recently strengthened by the adoption of a permanent mechanism for conflict prevention and resolution.

But the picture here is not all rosy. ECOWAS has found it difficult to implement peace keeping activities due partly to weak commitment from member states. It has made heavy use of Nigerian troops, which has brought criticism. It is not well financed, and thus has had difficulty maintaining operations. Nonetheless, the efforts have achieved some success, and the new conflict prevention and resolution mechanism has potential to achieve success.

Private sector development

Most ECOWAS countries have undergone structural adjustment programs. These programs have included policy changes to help create a more favorable environment for private sector activity. Often the programs also have included significant privatization components to help shed many of the parastatal organizations and nationally owned companies. However, much remains to be done.

Investment and FDI

Foreign investment in most ECOWAS countries both from outside and inside the region is lower than for all of Africa and even lower than Sub-Saharan averages (Page and Bilal). There is some limited investment from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria to other ECOWAS countries. Because investment flows within the region are low, there is little technology transfer or impetus for expanded intra-regional trade. Privatization offers another vehicle for attracting FDI if the other conditions for attracting FDI exist.

What about the potential for expanded FDI? Pigato argues that the FDI environment in Africa is inadequate to attract FDI. He argues that the incentive framewok suffers from the following deficiencies:

- Barriers to entry still abound in many countries. In addition, registration, licensing, and other administrative processes increase transaction costs.
- Many countries have put into place costly incentives to attract FDI, but most analysis indicates that the incentives are not very effective in attracting FDI. What investors need, more than direct financial incentives, is a clear and inexpensive path through the administrative procedures.

In today's world, Pigato argues, the traditional determinants of FDI are still important: political and macroeconomic stability, availability of natural resources, and a growing market. However, there are new determinants that are also quite significant:

- A favorable FDI environment – transparent and non-discriminatory regulatory environment, effective competition policies, efficient and fair judicial system, etc.
- Low transaction and business costs – The rules are important, but the way the rules are enforced is equally important. The administrative and legal systems must have competent and honest people implementing rules and regulations.

- Supplier networks and clusters – Countries with dynamic local firms have an advantage because foreign investors need local firms with whom to contract for local goods and services.
- Support institutions and technical services – Grades and standards, quality assurance bodies, etc. are important for creating and maintaining levels of quality and an image of quality products for the country.
- Human capital – There is a strong need for qualified human capital that can take advantage of modern technologies. Labor market flexibility also is quite important.
- Low cost infrastructure – Quality and reliable telephone service is very important. Good transport to and from the country also is needed. Energy costs also need to be reasonable.
- Intellectual property rights protection – Many multi-national companies will not invest in countries that have not established strong intellectual property rights protection.

Even when all these conditions are not met, West African countries can still attract FDI from what are called "foot-loose investors." These investors often are in labor intensive industries such as textiles and place a premium on being able to move from one country to another easily. Investment incentives may be particularly useful in attracting these investors. However, West Africa has not had much success in attracting these investors largely because the basic infrastructure in inadequate and because the administrative procedures are perceived to be too cumbersome.

Informal networks

NGOs and informal business networks have played a key role in the integration of West African societies and economies. Both formal and informal business networks have been shown to be quite effective in developing and sustaining commercial activities and cross-border trade. They also are effective at information exchange and serve as sources of information on market opportunities.

The best example of a more formal business network is the West African Enterprise Network (WAEN) (Page and Bilal). It brings together more than 350 business persons from 13 national business networks in ECOWAS countries. The two main objectives of WAEN are to contribute to the improvement of the business environment in West Africa and to promote cross-border trade and investment in the region. Some important activities include facilitating cross-border trade, cooperation with government officials on banking and trade issues, and supporting improved information systems.

Constraints and Opportunities

Over the past two or three decades, regional integration in West Africa has been a mixed story. UEMOA has achieved greater success among its members on many fronts, but has had an advantage of common language and support for the common currency from the French government. ECOWAS has made limited progress on a very ambitious agenda. It is fair to say, however, that there appears to be greater international interest and support for regional integration in West Africa today than in previous years. While the World Bank Africa Rural Development Strategy does not mention regional integration, the Bank does have a separate strategy for regional integration for West Africa (2001). E.U., U.S., and other bi-lateral donors also appear to have greater interest in regional integration today than in the past. And, of course, most importantly, the West African countries themselves seem to be more convinced today on the importance of better regional integration for their future stability and economic progress.

The major question, then, is how do we go about achieving more successful regional integration. Some of the answers have been provided in the text above, but in what follows, we will present some key directions and changes that will be required to achieve real regional integration.

Making institutions work

Easterly and Levine recently (August 2002) published a paper examining the roles of geography (or natural resource endowments), institutions, and policy in determining levels of economic development over the longer term. Their conclusion is that the most important factor is institutions. In their own words:

> We find evidence that tropics, germs, and crops affect development through institutions. We find no evidence that tropics, germs, and crops affect country incomes directly other than through institutions, nor do we find any effect of policies on development once we control for institutions.

In other words, good institutions are the key to successful economic development. Institutions here refers to all the package of business, economic, and social environment factors that are needed for efficient and effective functioning of markets and societies. The six specific institutional factors they used were the following:

- Voice and accountability – the extent to which citizens can choose their government, political rights, civil liberties, and an independent press.
- Political stability and absence of violence – a low likelihood that the government will be overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means.
- Government effectiveness – quality of public service delivery, competence of civil servants, and the degree of politicization of the civil service.
- Light regulatory burden – relative absence of government controls on goods markets, government interference in the banking system, excessive bureaucratic controls on starting new businesses, or excessive regulation of private business and international trade.
- Rule of law – protection of persons and property against violence or theft, independent and effective judges, contract enforcement.
- Freedom from graft – absence of the use of public power for private gain, corruption.

Clearly, the authors include in institutions also what economists would call sector or microeconomic policy. Their term “policy” refers to macroeconomic, exchange rate, monetary, and trade policy.

Some of these institutional factors apply only at the nation level. But others apply equally at the level of regional organization. If we truly want to achieve strong regional integration, then we must develop strong regional institutions, and these institutions must be supported by both member states and international donors.

Finding true common ground for integration

One of the fundamental changes that is occurring with globalization is that in many areas, the private sector is getting ahead of the public sector. In the past, it was the public sector that established grades and standards and rules for production and processing. Today that is changing. Private organizations are setting quality standards like ISO 9000 and 14000 and other quality standards. Agricultural production practices for countries trading with the European Union are being driven by EuroGAP (good agricultural practices). In some cases, supermarkets control the entire production and processing chain with representatives in the field who dictate the variety that will be planted, the chemicals that can be used in production (if any), the date for harvest, the packaging, treatment, processing, etc. Terms like supply chain management and traceability are essential for every business program.

The private sector is even having a major impact on international agreements. One reason for the flurry of regional agreements and bi-lateral agreements worldwide is that these enjoy greater support in the private sector than WTO negotiations. Regional and bi-lateral agreements are simpler, quicker to negotiate, and generally yield more genuine trade liberalization than multi-lateral negotiations.

So where is the agribusiness private sector in West Africa? Is it leading in the establishment of food and agricultural quality standards? Is it engaged in supply chain management? Is it striving individually and collectively to meet international, often privately established, quality standards? And is the agribusiness sector actively advocating rapid progress in establishing the necessary institutions that will lead to true regional free trade? Is the agribusiness sector adamantly pushing for enforcement of existing rules and for the elimination of informal trade barriers?

Is the agribusiness sector in West Africa ready to assume leadership in effecting the changes covered in this report and that everyone knows are needed? Is the agribusiness sector prepared to work together to achieve a greater gain for all (with the risk of loss of some special favors at the national level)?

Only if the answer to these questions is yes will we be able to make genuine progress in regional integration and to reap the gains there from. So we have both opportunities and constraints. Will we choose the opportunities?

Reducing transactions costs

If the private sector chooses to work diligently to seize the opportunities that abound, then significant reductions in transactions costs for agribusiness firms can be achieved. Trade costs will fall, and regional trade will increase. But also, West African agribusiness firms will become more competitive on the international market. West Africa will become more attractive for FDI, and established domestic firms will reap the benefits of doing business with these new entrants. If agribusiness firms in West Africa choose to seize the opportunities, costs of doing business will fall, and market opportunities will increase. But the private sector cannot look to governments to do this for you. Like your counterparts in the private sector the world over, agribusinesses in West Africa must become much more aggressive in achieving the goals we all share.

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